



# Saguaro Forest State Park

## Introduction

Prior to the establishment of Saguaro National Monument on March 1, 1933, the University of Arizona, spearheaded by U. of A. President Homer Shantz in a far sighted effort to save a bit of unspoiled Sonoran Desert, pursued the creation of a scientific preserve on the western bajada of the Rincon Mountains. The area was alternatively referred to as the Saguaro Forest State Park, the University Cactus Forest and the Cactus Forest State Park. In 1933 this preserve fell within the newly established boundaries of Saguaro National Monument. The State of Arizona and the University of Arizona would own land within the monument until 1959.

## Saguaro Forest State Park

By 1930 the ill-fated Papago Saguaro National Monument was no more and the area was turned over to the state. The National Park Service was now in search of a new monument for the protection of the Sonoran Desert ecosystem. Local Tucson conservationists and scientists, such as U. of A. President Homer Shantz, were already looking to preserve a portion of unspoiled Sonoran desert along with its iconic saguaro cacti. In 1928-29, one priority of the Tucson Natural History Society was the preservation of the locally known Tanque Verde Cactus Forest.<sup>1</sup> Named for the wash running out of the foothills of the Rincon Mountains; the forest occupied over a dozen square miles on the bajada at the foot of the Rincon Mountains.

By 1930 University of Arizona President Homer Shantz\* felt the time had come to push the agenda through the private avenues of land purchase. Tucson was building eastward and the time to act was pressing. Shantz retained realtor John E. Harrison to act as the University's agent. Harrison used university and private funds and set about piecing together land options for what he marketed as the University Cactus Forest. By August 1931 the

University had an investment of twenty one thousand dollars and had a lease on four and three-quarter sections. By 1935 The University either owned or leased from the State of Arizona 10.5 sections (6,560 acres) of land in the Cactus Forest of the newly established Saguaro National Monument (see Figure 1). At that time the monument was a tapestry of federal, state and private land. The Park Service had acquired an area on which the main attraction, the Saguaro, grew on land it did not own. The portion it did control consisted mainly of the mountainous former national forest east of the Cactus Forest.

University of Arizona President Homer Shantz succeeded in getting a company of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to work on the University owned and controlled land within the monument by designating it Saguaro Forest State Park. These men arrived in July 1935 and stayed at Camp Tanque Verde (SP-11-A) just north of the monument boundary on the north side of Tanque Verde Wash. Their main effort concentrated on the construction of the Cactus Forest loop road, removal of old roads, trails, homestead and squatter buildings, and filling in mines and prospect holes. The CCC also did preliminary work for the University's planned but never completed

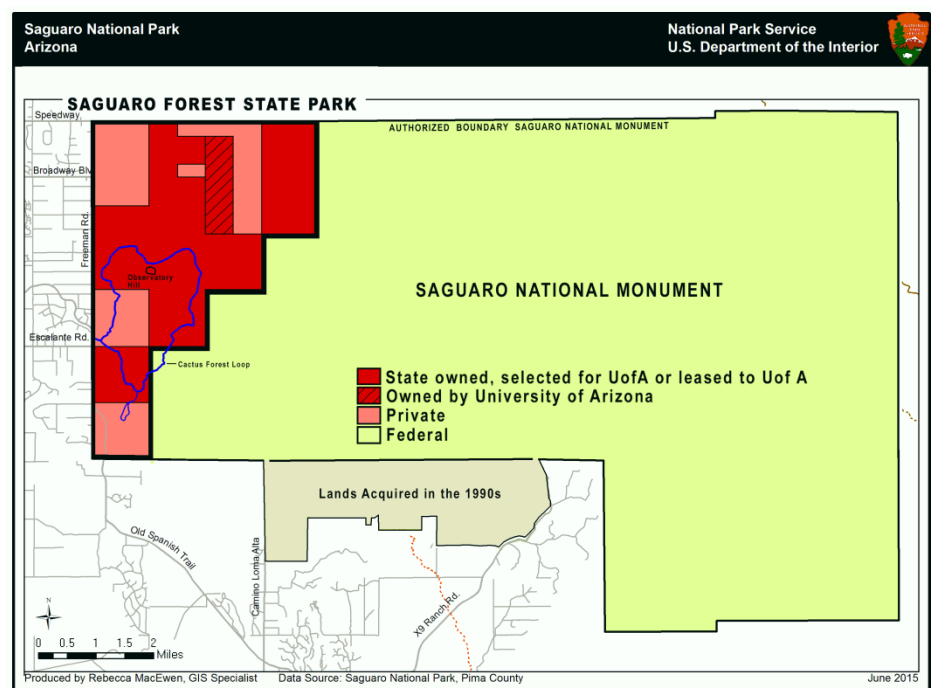


Figure 1. Original authorized boundary of Saguaro National Monument with Saguaro Forest State Park represented by heavy black line. Land ownership taken from 1935 CCC map.

observatory on top of Observatory Hill. According to Park Service documents, the CCC also helped out Paul Beaubien, the lone Park Service ranger stationed at the monument. They helped contacting and counting visitors at the Speedway entrance to the monument, and in catching cactus thieves and illegal hunters.

### The Long Struggle

Because of financial shortcomings resulting from the Great Depression, the university decided it needed to recoup the money it had spent on its so-called Saguaro Forest State Park. The University approached the Park Service about the prospects of them purchasing the land.

The State of Arizona also tried to sell their land to the Park Service but the Park Service had no money for such purchases and besides, they felt the asking price was too high. With the backing of the state, Arizona Senator Carl Hayden introduced several bills in the U.S. Senate that would authorize acquisition of state, university, and private land. Hayden introduced the first bill in 1937, and introduced similar bills again in 1939, 1941, 1943, and 1945. The bills failed because it was again thought that the cost of the land was too high.

Finally, in 1948 the U.S. Government and the state entered into land exchange negotiations by which the state and University would exchange their land within the monument for other federally owned land. In the meantime the Park Service received permission to buy three tracts of private land within the monument. By early 1956 the exchange was finally completed except for half of the University land (240 acres). The last of the University land was acquired by trade in 1959.

The purchase of the remaining private land within the monument, except for 775 acres which were recommended for deletion, was accomplished in 1972. By Public Law 94-578 of October 21, 1976 all of the 775 acres recommended for deletion (all of Section 8 in the NW corner of the monument and the area west of Old Spanish Trail south of Irvington Road in the SW corner of the monument) were removed from the monument. "Thus the long struggle over monument land ended."<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 2. Homer Shantz in the Cactus Forest in 1930.**

Colorado and worked on grasslands ecology and the acculturation of plants to the arid West.

For additional information about the Saguaro Forest State Park, see Resource Briefs:  
Cactus Forest Drive  
Cactus Shack  
Observatory Hill

<sup>1</sup> The Tucson Natural History Society Program, 1928-29, Tucson Natural History Society Ephemera File, Arizona Historical Society.

Clemensen, A. Berle  
1987 *Cattle, Copper, and Cactus: The History of Saguaro National Monument*. Historic Resource Study. National Park Service, Denver Service Center.

<sup>2</sup> IBID p.140

Marcus Burtner  
2011 *Crowning the Queen of the Sonoran Desert: Tucson and Saguaro National Park*. An Annotated History. MS on file at Saguaro National Park.

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\*U of A President from 1928-1936, Shantz earned a doctorate in Botany from the University of Nebraska in 1905 for the study of vegetation in